When Uncertainty Brings Pleasure: the Role of Outcome Imageability and Mental Imagery

Cheng Qiu, University of Hong Kong, China
Yih Hwai Lee, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Consumers generally prefer certainty to uncertainty, and as such often shun away from uncertain situations. Our research, however, demonstrates that consumers facing uncertainty (than certainty) associated with a future positive event (e.g., winning a lucky draw but not knowing the particular prize won) can experience greater, non-fleeting positive feelings. We further uncover the mechanism underlying such effect. Specifically, the durability of the pleasurable uncertainty effect hinges on the level of imagery elaboration that consumers generate from the various possible favorable outcomes (e.g., imagining the possible prizes in a lucky draw). Results from two experiments provide support for our framework.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13332/volumes/v35/NA-35

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
When Uncertainty Brings Pleasure: The Role of Outcome Imageability and Mental Imagery
Cheng Qiu, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Yih Hwai Lee, National University of Singapore, Singapore

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Neither consumers nor marketers appear to like uncertainty. Previous research shows that uncertainty during the purchase process may reduce customer loyalty, undermine consumer confidence, and delay purchase decisions. As such, consumers may seek information to reduce uncertainty while marketers may benefit from strategies that reduce such consumer uncertainty. Continuing these research efforts, yet contrasting past approaches, we examine uncertainty from positive outcomes and specify conditions where consumers can gain more pleasure from uncertainty than from certainty.

Consider an example of a “sure-win” lucky draw where consumers are assured of winning a prize. Upon drawing a prize, the marketer may immediately tell the consumers what the prize is, or alternatively, reveal the particular prize at a later time so that the consumers are uncertain about the prize for some period of time. Comparing between these approaches, which would elicit greater pleasure? Which would better sustain the pleasure consumers derive from the positive event, and why? Our research addresses these questions involving situations where individuals know the eventual outcome is positive yet they do not know which particular outcome would occur.

We suggest that such positive uncertainty may (a) elicit greater immediate positive feelings than certainty, because it evokes greater arousal which intensifies affective reactions, and (b) increase the duration of positive feelings beyond a mere pleasant surprise. Moreover, the durability of positive feelings hinges on the outcome imageability of the uncertain events. This is because the duration of positive feelings is proposed to increase with the level of imagery processing consumers engage in regarding the possible outcomes. Such imagery processing (e.g., visualizing the possible prizes and the situations of using these prizes) would be favorably enhanced when the uncertain events possess cues that are high in imageability in terms of both amount and specificity of imagery. When this happens, the ensuing imagery elaboration would feed and sustain the positive feelings that consumers experience. In contrast, consumers facing a certain positive outcome may imagine less about the outcome, causing their positive feelings to dissipate more rapidly.

As both extent and content of elaboration are two broad dimensions of imagery elaboration, we suggest that the outcome imageability of uncertain events is positively linked to the number of potential outcomes. However, this association should be bounded because a large number of alternative outcomes are unlikely to aid imageability due to the lack of a specified set of identifiable alternatives from which concrete mental imagery can be generated. Therefore, outcome imageability should be higher when the number of potential outcomes is moderate rather than small or large.

Experiment 1 tested this conjecture.

Experiment 1. This experiment employed a 3 (outcome imageability: limited-possible-outcomes vs. moderate-possible-outcomes vs. infinite-possible-outcomes) x 2 (measurement of feelings: T1—immediately following the event vs. T2—five minutes later) mixed-factorial design. Participants played a computer-simulated lucky draw game and were notified of winning a prize worth $12. Next, participants in the limited-possible-outcomes condition were informed they would receive one of two possible functional prizes and read the prize descriptions. Participants in the moderate-possible-outcomes condition were informed they would receive a consumer electronics product—a category cue that was pretested to elicit higher levels of imagery processing. Participants in the infinite-possible-outcomes condition received no further details about the prize. Thereafter, participants indicated their feelings (T1). Five minutes later, their feelings were measured again (T2). As predicted, only participants facing a moderate number of possible outcomes (high outcome imageability) experienced a significant drop of positive feelings from T1 to T2.

Experiment 2. This experiment had a 2 (uncertainty: present vs. absent) x 2 (outcome imageability: low-imagery product vs. high-imagery product) x 2 (instruction to imagine: present vs. absent) x 2 (measurement of feelings: T1—immediately following the event vs. T2—10 minutes later) mixed-factorial design. To obtain further support for our hypotheses, we compared the levels of positive feelings immediately following an uncertain event with those following a certain event; we adopted a different manipulation of outcome imageability by varying the imagery-evoking nature of prizes; we administered process-baseline conditions where participants received instructions to imagine about the prizes; we collected thought protocols to test the mediating role of imagery elaboration as the mechanism underlying the pleasurable uncertainty effect. Consistent with our prediction, participants in the uncertain condition experienced greater positive feelings at T1 than those in the certain condition. Moreover, only participants who were told they might receive one of two possible high-imagery (sensory-stimulating) prizes remained as happy after 10 minutes, whereas those in the certain condition (regardless of the nature of prize) and those in the uncertain, low-imagery (functional) prizes condition experienced a significant drop of positive feelings from T1 to T2. As expected, we found no differences between the instruction and no-instruction conditions, suggesting the nature of prizes may have constrained the extent of imagery elaboration. Participants who were instructed to imagine about the prizes also wrote down their thoughts about the prizes. Their responses were coded as either an imagery thought or a non-imagery thought, upon which we created an imagery elaboration index (the number of imagery thought divided by the number of total thought). Confirming our prediction, the imagery elaboration index fully mediated the effect of uncertainty and outcome imageability on the durability of positive feelings, whereas the number of total thought did not.

Aside from the immediate pleasurable effect of future positive uncertain outcomes, the temporal aspect of the pleasurable uncertainty effect may bear richer theoretical implications. In this respect, our main contribution lies in identifying the role of outcome imageability of the uncertain events and the ensuing imagery elaboration as the mechanism responsible for the durability of the pleasurable effect. Future research may further consider the contextual effects that pleasure under uncertainty brings, which may also be of interests to practitioners where the creation of positive uncertainty is not only an end (delighted consumers) but a means to an end (favorable responses to subsequent marketing stimuli) as well.
References


